## The Perception of EFL Libyan University Students Towards the Potential Advantages of Phonetic Symbols

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### Abstract

*The objective of this study is to investigate the perception of Libyan university students towards the potential advantages of phonetic symbols in learning the English language. The study encompasses 30 students from the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth semesters studying all in the English Department in the Faculty of Languages at the University of Tripoli. The data is collected through a close-ended questionnaire distributed online via Google Forms. The results suggest that the students' perception towards the potential advantages of phonetic symbols is seemingly positive. The findings conclude that students' views towards the advantages of familiarity, visual- support, usefulness and awareness-raising of phonetic symbols are relatively positive. However, certain responses show that students have almost negative views towards the perceived ease of phonetic symbols as well as the potential of autonomous learning. The study finally suggests that the students still find phonetic symbols difficult to understand and use due to their insufficient knowledge or lack of total awareness.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION
### 1.2. PHONETIC SYMBOLS

Pronunciation plays an indispensable role in communication (Muhamad & Rahmat, 2020). Thus, pronouncing words correctly means being able to communicate ideas and thoughts. Moreover, learning proper pronunciation is essential when acquiring or learning a foreign language (Putri et al. 2023). As defined by Schmidt (1995), pronunciation is the tangible production of speech sounds, stressing how the hearer grasps the produced sounds. Hence, pronunciation is quintessential to promoting one's English commutation skills (Trinh et al. 2022). One of the effective and valuable tools that help learners set up their pronunciation skills to pronounce and help them produce English words correctly is the use of phonetic symbols (Suryaleksana et al. 2022)

Phonetic symbols are distinct written symbols used to refer to speech sounds or sound features of one or several languages (Febriana et al. 2019). One of the most widely used phonetic symbols is the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association (Atkielski, 2019). From its foundation in 1886, the International Phonetic Association aims to develop a set of symbols to

represent speech sounds found in languages (Hancock, 2020). This set of symbols is known as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). It is "a generally agreed set of symbols for designating sounds unambiguously" (Smith 2000, p. 3). The IPA system is initially based upon phonetic characters in the Latin alphabet to set the representation of language in a spoken form (Qadir & Rizwan 2020, p.12975). The first IPA system, which was created in the late 19th century, is currently the most successful applied system (Pullum & Ladusaw 1996). The main principle of the IPA is to provide one symbol for one discrete speech sound and that symbol is used consistently for all languages (Nyyssönen, 2017). They are not only designed to represent different speech sounds but also to represent an abundant set of diacritics and iconic marks used to represent suprasegmental characteristics like stress (e.g. superscript ˈ and subscript ˌ stress marks to indicate primary and secondary stress) as well as tone such as/for a rising tone, \ for a falling tone, ∨ for a falling-rising tone, etc., each represented by a unique visual symbol (Mompean & Fouz-González 2021, Chen 2022),

The need for phonetic symbols arose from the fact that languages rarely have a one-to-one correspondence between graphemes and phonemes (Nyyssönen, 2017). In other words, one cannot always tell a word's pronunciation from its orthographic characters only. English, for example, is among these languages because "it has one of the worst grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence (Morris-Wilson 2004, p. 2). English has forty-four speech sounds but there are twenty-six alphabets. This means that the English alphabet cannot show the difference between the different sounds of the sequence 'th'in *this*, *that* and 'th' in *thank*, *throw*. Such no correspondence can be only resolved by the use of IPA symbols (Jahan, 2011, p.36)

Related to phonetic symbols is phonetic transcription, which refers to the representation of sounds in isolation or when they occur in larger forms such as words or utterances (Putri & Rahman, 2016). According to Mompean & Fouz-González (2021, p.156), phonetic symbols can be used for phonetic notation[1], to represent sounds or sound features in isolation, and the phonetic transcription is used to represent words or longer strings of speech written in IPA symbols. Thus, for instance, the symbol /ʃ/ is used as a phonetic notation to represent the consonant in words such as *so*_ci_*al* or _she_, while in the sequence /məˈʃiːn/ is referred to as the transcription of the word *ma*_chine_. González 2021, p.157) The use of both phonetic notation and phonetic transcription would make sense if they are used under a standard system of phonetic symbols such as the IPA.

The importance of phonetic symbols in phonetics or other fields of linguistics is indisputable by researchers or linguistics who find these symbols convenient explicit way of representing human speech sounds (Febriana et al. 2019). The use of phonetic symbols specifically in learning and teaching English language only came later (Hancock, 2020). Phonetic symbols, which students may often come across in dictionaries or certain teaching materials and even in current learning Apps, have become crucial to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners (Mompean, 2015).

The focus of previous studies has always been on the perspectives of teachers towards the implementation of phonetic symbols in EFL classes. Different opinions have arisen on whether or not to use phonetic symbols in teaching English pronunciation (Mompean & Lintunen,

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[1] The expression 'phonetic symbol' is used here since it is the most common term among EFL Libyan students.

2015).    In this respect, some researchers support the use of phonetic symbols in EFL pronunciation learning instruction (e.g. Newton 1999; Lintunen 2005, Skopva 2017; Hazhar, 2019), while others seem to consider phonetic symbols unnecessary to learners  (e.g. Cant 1976,  Paikeday 1993 cited in Mompean  2015, p. 292).  As stated by Atkielski (2019), the latter view often epitomizes the reluctance to use phonetic symbols in EFL classes. This could be due to the teacher's lack of knowledge and training in teaching phonetic symbols or even due time limitations.  Eventually, given these two different views, the use of phonetic symbols in teaching English pronunciation will depend on the teachers' objectives in teaching, previous learning and teaching experiences,   as well as the nature of the materials used (Mompean & Lintunen, 2015).

 Recent studies, however, have shifted the focus towards the views of learners towards the use of phonetic symbols. The current study examines whether EFL Libyan university learners have a positive or a negative attitude towards the use of phonetic symbols in learning and teaching. The learners' views were examined after reviewing the advantages of phonetic symbols as emphasized in studies such as by Mompean (2015), Mompean and Lintunen (2015), Putri & Rahmah (2016), Febriana et al. (2019),  Atkielski (2019),  Mompean & Fouz-González (2020). Specifically, the study of  Mompean (2015) provided four potential advantages of phonetic symbols for EFL learners. These are: a) systematicity, b) visual support c) awareness and d) autonomous learning.

### Systematicity

Unlike alphabetic systems, phonetic symbols are consistent in the 'one symbol-one value' principle (Mompean, 2015). In other words, each symbol stands for one particular distinctive sound and each sound is always represented by the same grapheme, diacritic or any other mark (Mompean & Lintunen, 2015).  There are no "silent letters," nor any speech sounds that are not represented in phonetic symbols (Atkielski, 2019).

  Alphabetical systems should follow the principle "with no - or at least very few – irregularities" (Febriana, 2019, p.15). This is found in languages in which the graphemes and phonemes are consistently related as in languages such as Turkish, Finish or Spanish. However, due to historical circumstances, some languages have developed discrepancies between sounds and their spellings (Kodirova 2020, p.3).   In English, for instance,  many phonemes can be represented by one letter, and one phoneme can be represented by different letters and their combinations. For example, the letter *c* can represent the sounds:  /k/, /s/, /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in *cat, city, cello* and *ocean*, while the phoneme /ʃ/ can be spelt in 14 ways  (as in *shoe, sugar, issue, mansion, mission, nation, suspicion, ocean, nauseous, conscious, chaperone, schist, fuchsia, and pshaw*)  (Celce-Murcia et al.  2010, p. 54). Moreover, there are many silent letters like **b** in *doubt*, **w** in *answer* or **gh** in *bought.* This sound-spelling inconsistency often misleads those learning English and slows the learning process (Beghoul, 2017).  Therefore, the use of phonetic symbols helps to solve this problem since it offers a one-to-one relationship between each phonetic symbol and its corresponding sound. Supporting this idea, Mompean & Lintunen (2015, p.295) suggest, that "phonetic notation can function as a convenient code with which teachers and learners can discuss issues in pronunciation simply and unambiguously".

Phonetic symbols are also systematic and more comprehensive in representing the allophonic variants and suprasegmental features (e.g. stress, rhythm, intonation) (Mompean & Lintunen 2015).  These  include the velarization in laterals (e.g. *lead* [li:d] vs *deal* [di:ɫ]), lexical stress

differences (e.g. ˈ*record* n vs re ˈ*cord* v), differences in tonicity (e.g. *neutral \thank you* vs *emphatic thank \you*), or connected speech phenomena such as gemination (e.g. I don't know [-nn-] or [nː] following /t/ elision), among many others (Mompean & Fouz-Gonzále 2021, p. 157)

### Visualness / Visual Support

Phonetic notation provides a visual representation of sounds which has the advantage to develop awareness of both teaching and learning pronunciation patterns (Febriana, 2019). It became one of the most essential visual aids that a teacher can use when teaching pronunciation. (Nyyssönen, 2017; Zitouni et al, 2021). It is difficult for learners to distinguish the differences between sounds by listening alone, unless students go through intensive ear-training or recordings are accessible for replay  (Kodirova 2020).  Learners can be easily confused when sounds in both the  L1  (First Language ) and L2 (Second Language)  are quite similar, but not exactly the same  (Grant, 2014, p. 127). For example, in Japanese, there is no contrast between the phonemes /l/ and /r/. Thus, Japanese learners often find it hard to master the equivalent English sounds. Spanish speakers face the same problem when they encounter the contrast between the English phonemes /v/ and /b/ since in Spanish these sounds are allophones and perceived as the same sound. Accordingly, hearing words alone will not help those learners to differentiate the sounds (Checa, 2017). Therefore, phonetic symbols can be used as " a visual reminder of real auditory stimuli and the concepts they represent, helping learners remember the latter and provide  a model on which to work" (Mompean & Lintunen 2015, p. 5),

Finally, the visualness of symbols may be used in attractive ways by teachers when developing or adapting materials for pronunciation lessons (Mompean & Lintunen 2015, p.6). These include, capitalization changes in font size, font weight (from ultra-light to extra-bold or black) or font colour can highlight specific aspects of materials. Thus, the visual representation of phonetic symbols will help EFL learners comprehend the elements of pronunciation and have a better understanding of their mistakes by comparing their transcriptions of their own to those of the given phonetic symbols (Rajab, 2013).

### Awareness raising

Phonetic symbols are beneficial in raising awareness of pronunciation aspects that are unknown or unnoticed by learners (Harmer, 2001).  For instance, EFL learners often fail to notice features such as accent differences, connected speech processes (e.g. assimilation, elision etc.), or the differences in vowels between some minimal pairs such as /e/ *set* and /æ/ *sat* or /ɪ/ *bin* and /iː/ *bean*. These pronunciation elements can be ignored, not because of their difficulty but it could be due to the unawareness of students of such features (Mompean 2015, Kodirova, 2020).

According to Ortega (2009, p.158), children acquire a second language so well because they have "the cognitive and linguistic endowment to learn it entirely implicitly". In other words, children rely on implicit (tacit, intuitive) types of innate language learning mechanisms. In contrast, adults will rarely if ever accomplish complete success in learning L2 because they learn the language through 'analysis and analogy' i.e. explicitly.  Being cognitively mature and having developed the necessary metalinguistic skills, adults use other learning paths when learning a new language and consequently may ask for explicit instruction in class (Kodirova

2020, p. 6). Explicit instruction helps to raise a learner's awareness. According to Ortega (2009, p. 137), "If instruction targets explicit processes, … it can help summon conscious attention [emphasis added] in ways needed to optimize the learning of particularly challenging generalizations" Explicit instruction can be used in instructing pronunciation. Though some L2 pronunciation aspects can be easily learned or acquired only by imitation, there are also some features that are very hard for L2 learners to comprehend unless they are encouraged to consciously pay attention to them and consequently become aware of them (Pištora 2017, p. 34). Thus, phonetic symbols allow learners to spot pronunciation patterns that are very hard to perceive via listening only.

### Autonomous learning

The awareness-raising of phonetic symbols and their visualness have the power to promote autonomous or independent learning (Mompean 2015, p.297). According to Hedge (2000), students can autonomously learn both inside and outside the classroom and also be able to use resources in both contexts. In the classroom, learners can recognize their pronunciation errors better if it is provided visually in teachers' feedback. However, outside the classroom, "even advanced learners may develop inaccurate impressions of what the native-speaker pronunciation sounds like" (Febriana et al. 2019, p.27). Thus, the only way to lessen this problem is to help learners read the phonetic transcription of words found in dictionaries. According to Celce-Murcia et al. (2010, p.54), students who are able to decode phonetically transcribed words in dictionaries or any EFL materials "will be better equipped to check pronunciation autonomously", on condition that students are aware of how to use phonetic symbols (Mompean & Lintunen 2015, p.6).

Nowadays most dictionaries and Computer/or Mobile Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or (MALL) resources use phonetic symbols even when there is a chance to hear the word's pronunciation. Dictionaries such as Oxford, and Longman, as well as Google Dictionary and Google Translate, provide their users with phonetic transcriptions of isolated words. Furthermore, YouTube also has become another source for learning and instructing which is favoured by many teachers and students all over the world (Kodirova 2020, p. 7).

Mompean and Lintunen (2015) mentioned another independent learning skill that might be fostered by the use of phonetic transcription. It is "the ability to refer, in handwriting or typescript, to pronunciation units and features" (p. 297). For example, Finnish, French and Spanish learners of English usually "transcribe English words such as '*fill*' and '*feel*' both with the same letter, that is (i.e.'fil'), given that these languages do not have a qualitative distinction between front vowels such as the one found in English" Mompean & Lintunen (2015, p.297). Thus, learners resort to the spelling conventions of their L1 to represent the pronunciation of L2 words. However, the sound system of L1 is not always identical to the one in the L2. Therefore, to achieve the goal of correct English pronunciation, an independent phonetic sound system, which adequately represents English sounds, serves as a better means (Kodirova 2020, p. 13).

Finally, autonomous learning also promotes further skills: self-monitoring and self-correction (Mompean & Lintunen, 2015, Mompean 2015). This skill can be challenging for learners not only due to learners' lack of awareness of what is to be corrected but also the lack of tools to do so. Thus, since phonetic symbols allow pronunciation features to be written down and

studied, the students' potential for self-monitoring will be evident. This naturally requires learners to have the knowledge of phonetic symbols in order to recognize their pronunciation errors and not just the skill to check pronunciation forms in a dictionary (Febriana et al. 2019, p.28).

In addition to the above advantages of phonetic symbols in pronunciation instruction, learners' views towards phonetic symbols were revealed by Henderson et al. (2015). This can be seen by the learners' *familiarity* towards the use of phonetic notations.  There are certain ways to see  learners' familiarity towards phonetic symbols: how familiar the learners are with phonetic symbols, whether learners are taught how to use at  least some of the phonetic symbols at school or university, and how often the students  see phonetic symbols in dictionaries or textbooks (Febriana 2019, p.22)

 Another way to test learners' views towards phonetic symbols can be seen by *the ease and usefulness* of phonetic symbols (Tergujeff, 2013, p. 84).  According to Tergujeff (2013), the use of phonetic symbols in EFL classes helps learners to remember English sounds, look up words in the dictionary, write notes on how to pronounce new words and help them realize the importance of working on their pronunciation. On the other hand, it was found that phonetic notations might negatively affect the spelling of the students especially those in lower levels. When learners use phonetic symbols too much, they may forget the correct spelling of the word. That is why phonetic symbols are actively used at university levels (Febriana 2019, p.24).

   To this end, it can be concluded that the views of EFL learners towards phonetic symbols can be revealed by the learners' familiarity and how they perceive the ease and usefulness of phonetic symbols.

### 1.3.Previous Studies

   Most recent studies have prominently put a great emphasis on learners and learning rather than teachers and teaching over the last twenty years (Hişmanoğlu, 2006). Accordingly, the views of EFL learners towards the use of phonetic symbols have been examined by many researchers in recent years. Here are some of the relevant conducted studies.

   The first two main studies were done by Mompean & Lintunen (2015) and Mompean (2015). Both research papers compared the perspectives of advanced EFL university students towards the advantages of phonetic symbols in three different countries i.e., Finland, France and Spain. Results revealed that the majority of learners had positive views towards the use of phonetic symbols. Students have particularly agreed that phonetic symbols have raised their awareness of L2 pronunciation patterns. They have also agreed that phonetic symbols are easy and useful, they represent a visual support for learning and facilitate autonomous learning.

In 2018, Putri studied the perception of EFL students in the State Islamic Institute of Palangka Raya (Indonesia) towards IPA symbols as the pronunciation learning system of English education.  It was found that the students' perception towards the use of IPA was very positive. Most students have agreed that IPA symbols are useful when learning pronunciation and they also increase learners' autonomy when learning English pronunciation.

In their study, Suherman and Indrayani (2017) focused on the perception of students towards IPA symbols as introduced to them in their pronunciation class. The study revealed that students were aware of the importance of phonetic symbols in improving their pronunciation. However, they did not have a sufficient background about it. The findings suggested that learners need more time to learn about the phonetic symbols and teachers should be equipped with enough knowledge of the IPA symbols and simplify its use to students.

The research of Febriana et al. (2019), which encompassed the students of the English Study Program in IAIN Curup (Indonesia), revealed that most students had positive views towards phonetic symbols, particularly towards their familiarity with phonetic symbols. However, some students had negative perceptions towards the usefulness of phonetic symbols and encountered difficulties when using them because they were too difficult to be understood.

A study by Putri and Rahman (2016) revealed that college students had a positive attitude towards the use of phonetic symbols particularly as an effective technique for improving pronunciation. However, most participants were left with difficulty when using IPA symbols because they had not been exposed to these symbols in their previous level of study. Students have agreed though that phonetic symbols are useful and should be implemented in their future teaching careers.

Mirza (2013) investigated the perception of Bangladeshi students towards the IPA symbols. The study showed that learners relied on their knowledge of English letters while reading the transcription of English words. It was also found that all the IPA symbols representing the English consonants were not similarly difficult for the students to master. There was a clear hierarchy of difficulty. The most troublesome symbols for those learners were those which are either different in appearance from English letters or represent an unlikely sound: (/ŋ/, /θ/, /ð/, /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/ & /j/).

Tergujeff (2013) interviewed Finnish students, in different primary and secondary schools, to explore their views on English pronunciation teaching. Through interviews, she revealed that the learners did not seem to have "aspirations to native-like pronunciation, but rather aim at achieving intelligible and fluent speech" (ibid p. 81). Tergujeff asked primary- and secondary-level students about the usefulness of phonetic symbols in EFL teaching. Her participants had mixed reactions as some of them considered phonetic symbols useful when checking the pronunciation of words from a dictionary, while others considered the knowledge of phonetic symbols had a negative effect on their spelling.

In Libyan context, Fayad et al. (nd.) investigated the effect of using phonetic transcription in teaching pronunciation to EFL university students at the University of Benghazi. The study differs from the current study since it does not focus on the perception of students towards phonetic symbols, instead, it attempts to investigate whether the IPA symbols were effective in teaching pronunciation to the students. The data was collected via a pre-test and a post-test given to students by their lecturers. The results showed that the use of phonetic transcription in teaching pronunciation has improved the students' pronunciation.

Therefore, the following study aims to examine the perspectives of Libyan EFL University students towards the advantages of phonetic symbols. The questions are addressed in this study:

a) Do Libyan EFL Libyan university students have positive or negative views towards phonetic symbols?
b) What are the main advantages of phonetic symbols according to the Libyan EFL university learners?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.2.Participants

A total of 30 university students studying at the Department of English in the Faculty of Languages at University of Tripoli participated in this study. The data was obtained during the Autumn term of the academic year 2022-2023. The students were 90% females and 10% males and were all above 20 years old.  They all had a prior sufficient acquaintance with phonetic symbols, so as to take part in the study and to express their opinions on the subject. It is worth mentioning that all of the participants have enrolled in the compulsory courses of Phonetics 1, 2, 3, and 4, during the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth semesters of their levels of study.

### 2.3.Instrument

An online questionnaire, utilizing Google Forms, was distributed through social networks to test the students' perception of the use of the phonetic symbols. The questionnaire was constructed in the form of a five-step Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree) with 22 statements randomly listed to target five essential areas a) familiarity with phonetic symbols b) ease and usefulness of phonetic symbols c) autonomous learning potential d) awareness-raising potential; e) perceived visual support potential.  The indicators were adapted from Mompean (2015), Mompean and Lintunen (2015), and Putri (2018).

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Table (1) Familiarity with phonetic symbols*

| | Indicator | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1) I'm familiar with phonetic symbols and I know what they mean. | 36.7% | 36.7% | 20% | 3.3% | 3.3% |
| | | 11 | 11 | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| | 2) I have often seen phonetic symbols in dictionaries and textbooks | 13.3% | 50% | 16.7% | 3.3% | 13.3% |
| | | 4 | 15 | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| | 3) I was taught how to read some of the phonetic symbols at school/high school | 3.3% | 10% | 10% | 36.7 | 40% |
| | | 1 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 12 |
| *Familiarity* | 4) I was introduced to the phonetic symbols at the university | 46.7% | 33.3% | 0 | 20% | 0 |

| | 14 | 10 | 6 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |

As Table (1) divulges, participants responded positively to the indicators dealing with familiarity with phonetic symbols. This is reflected in indicator (1), where 36.7% of the participants chose the option Strongly Agree and 36.7% of the participants stated Agree. This is also shown clearly in indicator (2), where 50% have agreed that they have seen phonetic symbols in dictionaries course materials and textbooks. In indicator (3), 40% strongly disagreed and 36.7% disagreed. On the contrary, 46.7% have selected Strongly Agree to indicator (4), and 33.3% have chosen Agree. These results were predictable since the teaching of phonetic symbols is prominently more active at university levels in Libya than at any other educational level. A similar finding was shown by Mompean and Lintunen (2015), where Spanish and French learners were not certain about the use of phonetic symbols for younger learners. This would seem "to reflect the idea that phonetic notation is best suited to learners capable of intellectualizing the learning process" (Hancock 1994, p. 19). Finnish learners, on the other hand, had a different opinion. This could be that Finland textbooks have pronunciation lessons using phonetic symbols in word lists even for students at lower levels of education. It is generally recommended in many research studies that EFL/ or even ESL (English as a Second Language) learners should start learning phonetic symbols at lower levels of education. Skopová (2017) emphasized the importance of teaching phonetic symbols to lower secondary English classes. The study suggested that the knowledge and the use of phonetic symbols at this level help learners develop their pronunciation skills.

*Table (2) Usefulness and Perceived ease*

| | Indicator | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | 1) I usually remember at once what a given phonetic symbol means/ or refers to | .7% | 33.3% | 43.3% | 10% | 6.7% |
| | | | 10 | 13 | 3 | 2 |
| | 2) Phonetic symbols help me remember the sounds of English | 0% | 43.3% | 16.7% | 23.3% | 6.7% |
| | | | 13 | 5 | 7 | 2 |
| *Usefulness and perceived ease* | 3) Phonetic symbols help me realize the importance of working on the pronunciation of English | 3.3% | 43.3% | 16.7% | 10% | 6.7% |
| | | | 13 | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| | 4) If I use phonetic symbols too much, I may forget the correct spellings of words. | .7% | 36.7% | 23.3% | 30% | 3.3% |
| | | | 11 | 7 | 9 | 1 |
| | 5) Phonetic symbols are too difficult for children (under twelve). | 3.3% | 30% | 6.7% | 16.7% | 3.3% |
| | | 3 | 9 | 2 | 5 | 1 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6) Phonetic symbols are not difficult for older learners (especially over sixteen). | 3.3% | 40% | 13.3% | 20% | 13.3% |
| | | 12 | 4 | 6 | 4 |
| 7) Phonetic symbols are the effective tool for teaching pronunciation. | 6.7% | 50% | 6.7% | 13.3% | 3.3% |
| | | 15 | 2 | 4 | 1 |

With regard to the indicators related to the perceived ease and usefulness of phonetic symbols, participants seem to show mixed responses as depicted in table (2). Similar results were revealed in Mompean (2015). These findings indicate that students are either less certain about the use of phonetic symbols or students consider phonetic symbols more or less difficult depending on who uses it and what they are used for (Mompean 2015, p.304). This is clearly shown in indicator (1), where 43.3% were neutral, 33.3% agreed, but only 6.7% strongly agreed. In indicator (2), 43.3% agreed, 16.7% were neutral, and 10% have strongly agreed. In indicator (3), 43.3% agreed, 23.3% strongly agreed, and 16.7% chose Neutral. Overall, learners believe that phonetic symbols helped them remember English sounds and also helped them realize the importance of these symbols to their pronunciation skills. On the other hand, 36.7% agreed to indicator (4). Similar findings were shown in Febriana et al. (2019), where 63% students agreed that if they used phonetics symbols too much, they may forget the correct spelling of words. The study suggested students still find phonetic symbols difficult to understand.

While 43.3% strongly agreed to indicator (5), 40% of the students agreed to indicator (6). Similar findings were revealed in the study of Mompean (2015) and Mompean & Lintunen (2015), where the French and the Spanish participants thought that phonetic symbols are too difficult for children under 12. The Finish learners, on the other hand, showed an opposite opinion. This is because phonetic symbols are taught in lower levels of education in Finland than in France or Spain (Mompean 2015, p.306). Recent studies have yielded findings which support the teaching of phonetic symbol to students at lower levels of education. Qadir & Rizwan's (2020) study has shown that learners who have learnt IPA symbols in primary level at private schools scored better in listening comprehension tests , compared to those learners who were not taught IPA symbols in the same level at public schools. Also, Ma's (2016) study has proved that IPA symbols is an effective tool in teaching English back vowels to Native Japanese children aged 4 and 5. It was eventually shown that by the use of pictures, the children had shown improvement in their production of these vowels. Lipińska (2017) stated that children who are exposed to English at an early stage will be able to distinguish phonetic symbols from the English letters without confusion. Lipińska recommended teaching IPA young learners, who are aware of the language's rules, at higher level in primary schools, especially those at 5th and 6th in Mainland China. This has also been emphasized in the study of Chen (2022), where results have shown that the use of phonetic symbols as learning strategy helped the students at grade 5-6 with their English vocabulary pronunciation.

Finally, 50% of the students believed that *Phonetic symbols are the effective tool for teaching pronunciation*. This supports the studies of Putri & Rahmah (2018) and Putri (2018), where participants had significantly agreed to continuously use phonetic symbols in their own teaching experience because of the many advantages that can be gotten after.

*Table (3) Autonomous Learning*

| | Indicator | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1) Phonetic symbols help me check the pronunciation of words in dictionaries | 10%  3 | 23.3%  7 | 30%  9 | 30%  9 | 5.7%  2 |
| | 2) I don't pay attention to phonetic symbols when I see them in a dictionary/ or a book | 20%  5 | 20%  5 | 10%  3 | 50%  15 | 0 |
| | 3)Phonetic symbols increase my ability to do a self-correction to pronounce the words. | 20%  5 | 43.3%  13 | 16.7%  5 | 16.7%  5 | 3.3%  1 |
| | 4)Phonetic symbols help me improve my pronunciation skill by myself | 36.7%  11 | 26.7%  8 | 16.7%  5 | 16.7%  5 | 3.3%  1 |
| | 5) If I know how to interpret phonetic symbols, I can more or less know how the word is pronounced and it's not essential to listen to the word as pronounced by a native speaker. | 10%  3 | 46.7%  14 | 20%  5 | 23.3%  7 | 0 |
| *Autonomy* | 6)When I hear a new word, I sometimes try to write it down with phonetic symbols | 0  3 | 10%  5 | 16.7%  16 | 53.3%  5 | 20% |
| | 7) When I hear a new word, I sometimes use spelling to write it down. | 20%  5 | 43.3%  13 | 10%  3 | 26.7%  8 | 3.3%  1 |

Overall, the participants almost positive towards the statements to the potentials that phonetic symbols offer for autonomous learning. However, learners agreed slightly less towards the indicator (1), where 23 % of all participants agree, and 30% stated Neutral. On the other hand, 50% of students did not agree to indicator (2). The results somehow contradict to what have been found in previous studies. Febriana et al. (2019), for instance, revealed that 64% of the participants found phonetic symbols were helpful to check the pronunciation of words in dictionaries. As suggested by Tergujeff (2013), checking a word in the dictionary provoke a more positive attitude towards the usefulness of phonetic symbols in learning pronunciation of words.

Moreover, 43.3% of the learners responded positively towards to indicator (3) and 36.7% of the participants chose strongly agreed to indicator (4). This was also indicated in the study of Putri & Rahman (2016), where students have agreed that knowing how to read phonetic symbols help them avoid mistakes when pronouncing English words, to do a self-correction

and decrease the fossilized errors. As a result, this will help in increasing students' autonomy in improving their pronunciation outside classrooms. This can be only achieved after students have learned how to use the values and the features that represent these phonetic symbols (Hedge, 2000).

Interestingly, 46% of the students agreed to indicator (5). Similar results were found in Mompean & Lintunen (2015), where Spanish learners have agreed that knowing how to interpret phonetic symbols helped them figure out how words were pronounced even without the need of an auditory model from a native speaker. However, in indicator (6), 53% of students did not agree to the statement and 43.3% agree to indicator (7). The findings imply that students still don't know how to use the phonetic symbols by themselves or just try to guess the pronunciation through the spelling of English words. This was also revealed in the study of Mirza (2013) where Bangladeshi students dependent heavily on their knowledge of English spelling when reading the phonetic transcription of English words.

Mompean & Fouz-González (2021, p.5) insist that "…using orthographic labels may hinder correct identification of some English sounds". This is due to the lack of correspondence between pronunciation and spelling. In their study, Fouz-González & Mompean (2020) found that one Spanish learner made mistakes when identifying the vowel in the word *birth* /ɜ:/ which is spelt with 'i'. This due to the fact that <i> is always pronounced /i/ in Spanish. This poses a further serious difficulty when learners associate a specific sound as the phonetic symbol /ɜ:/ in *birth* with words have similar sound but spelt differently (e.g. *burn, work, learn*). Therefore, learning English pronunciation effectively and precisely does not rely on orthographical labels (Mompean & Fouz-González 2021, p.10).

*Table (4) Visual-Support*

| | Indicator | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1)Phonetic symbols help me regard the sounds of English as less abstract | 26.7% | 20% | 30% | 20% | 3.3% |
| | | 8 | 6 | 9 | 6 | 1 |
| *Visual -support* | 2)Phonetic symbols help me visualize the sounds of English. | 23.3% | 43.3% | 20% | 10% | 3.3% |
| | | 7 | 13 | 6 | 3 | 1 |

The indicators related to the category visual support have received overall positive responses. In indicator (1), 26.7% of the students strongly agreed, 20% agreed and 30% were neutral. It seems that students did not believe how phonetic symbols make sounds of English less abstract for them. Or, they were not aware of the advantage of phonetic symbols as visual support when learning sounds. A similar finding was found in Mompean (2015), where Finnish learners were the least likely to agree with the same statement as opposed to the Spanish and French learners. In indicator (2), 43.3% of the students strongly agreed, 23.3% of students agreed and 20% were

neutral. Overall, the majority of students had positive opinions of the potentials that phonetic symbols offer for visual support.  Similar findings were found in Mompean (2015), Mompean & Lintunen (2015), Febriana et al (2019), and Putri & Rahman (2018) where participants agreed with the visual support of phonetic symbols.

*Table (5) Awareness*

| Indicator | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) Phonetic symbols help me become aware of discrepancies and correspondences between spelling and pronunciation in English | 36.7%<br>11 | 30%<br>9 | 16.7%<br>5 | 13.3%<br>4 | 3.3%<br>1 |
| 2) phonetic symbols help me become aware of the existence of sounds, sound features and sound combinations | 30%<br>9 | 50%<br>15 | 3.3%<br>1 | 13.3%<br>4 | 3.3%<br>1 |

*(Awareness raising)*

Students have shown positive views towards the awareness-raising potential of phonetic symbols. 36.7%  of the participants strongly agree to the indicator (1) and 30%  have agreed to the same statement. These results were also found in Febriana et al. (2019), where 93%, of almost all students, found that phonetic symbols useful for awareness raising. Similarly, findings revealed by Mompean (2015) and Mompean & Lintunen (2015) that the Finish, Spanish and French learners "unanimously agreed that the use of phonetic notation facilitates awareness-raising" (Mompean & Lintunen 2015, p.14).

In indicator (2), 50% agreed and only 30% strongly agreed with the same statement. Similar results were revealed in Mompean (2015), Febriana et al. (2019) and Febriana (2019).  In line with Harmer (2001), phonetic symbols help learners become aware of pronunciation aspects that they don't easily notice. These aspects include stress, intonation, and connected speech processes, among others. Researchers such as Mompean & Fouz-González (2021), emphasized that teachers must raise the students' awareness towards these features. They also argue that drawing the learners' attention to such aspects of speech may raise the student's awareness of how speech works in context. This can be achieved through the implementation of contextualized speech activities which include examples of such implicit speech patterns (ibid, p.162).

## 4. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the perspectives of EFL Libyan University students towards the potential advantages of phonetic symbols in learning and teaching. Overall, the majority of students had positive views of the important use of phonetic symbols.  The students' answers were positive particularly to familiarity and to the potential of phonetic symbols for visual support, usefulness and awareness-raising. However, most students still thought that phonetic symbols were not easy to use or understand and they would instead depend on their English spelling whenever they learn the pronunciation of a new word. This was also clear for the

potential of phonetic symbols for autonomous- learning. Students' answers revealed that they still would rely on English spelling unless they had the knowledge of how to decode and use phonetic symbols. This concludes that the students were not totally aware of the use of phonetic symbols even though the results seemed almost positive for the potential of raising awareness. Thus, there is a need to expand the student's awareness of the important use of phonetic symbols through different types of production practice and feedback provision. It is also essential to address that associating spelling with speech sounds will pose more difficulties to the learners. More specifically, learners should realize that pronunciation is a language-independent skill that should <u>not</u> be taught through spelling. Finally, university professors should not only focus on teaching phonetics and phonology theoretically but they should also address the pedagogical potentials of phonetic symbols and their teaching applications to pronunciation.

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